

Intro duction

THIS ISSUE OF LIKHAAN was written and published in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with most of the country still under some form of quarantine. These pieces were written, or revised, during this time of fear and sorrow and enforced isolation. As editors we expected this surreal situation to be reflected in the contributions submitted. Some of the writers did, in fact, address the dark presence, but most veered off in other directions. And, perhaps after all, this is a good thing. The issue would be bleak indeed if it were to be mired in unmitigated misery.

We shall begin this Introduction with the section in Filipino, and for this, I shall yield the space to Luna Sicat Cleto, our Associate Editor for Filipino.

May dating ang “Ang Pinakamakapal na Tsinelas sa Balat ng Lupa” ni Jov Almero na parang tumitikim ka ng mainit na ginataan at nasa bahay kang muli ng pagkabata. Hindi pa-cute ang pagkakalarawan ng kamusmusan, may tono ang pagsasalaysay na may distansiya sa pagroromantisa ng yugto pero hindi rin iyon ginagawang slideshow ng pagkaapi ng mga musmos na mahirap. Katunayan, kaya masarap basahin ang akda ay umuwi tayo sa mga payak na kaligayahang alam nating hindi na babalik, pero may pagpapaalala rin ng payak na kapangyarihan ng kabataan na empowering para sa mga nagkagulang na.

May noir sa tono ng “Room 202” ni Chuckberry Pascual: isang silip sa kamalayan ng mga nagsasagawa ng pamamaslang. Kalkulado ang bigwas ng karahasan, maging ang kurot at hapdi ng pagkamalay sa kahinaang iniingusan pero nadarama. Hindi romantizado, may realismo sa hubog ang karakter, maging ang motibasyon, at natagong pilat mula sa dysfunctional na palaki sa mundong naglalawa sa kontradiksiyon.

Marahas, suryal, tila walang katuturan ang “Gaba Gaba Hunyango” ni Khavn de la Cruz. May ritmo ang mga pangungusap na parang audio ng isang lasing, sadyang staccato kung minsan, na ginagawang bulusok sa iba’t ibang mga bahagi. Walang sinasantong mga tauhan, lahat ay “bukas” sa kanilang pinakapribado’t pinakaprimtibong antas ng gutom, libog, hinagpis. Walang sentral na kamalayan, sinusundan ng camera ang bawat “tauhan” na nakapain lang ang buhay sa lagim, pagkawala, pagsabog. Nagsasahunyango ang mga boses dahil puro dissolve to, hanggang sa literal na matutunaw ang lahat ng tao sa pagbuhos ng ulan. Isa ang awtor sa mga walang takot na sabihing ang teksto/narratibo ay kamerang humuhuli ng lahat, ultimo amag na naiwan sa lente.

Pantastiko ang kapangyarihan ng sapantaha ng “Attack of the 50-foot Transwoman” ni Paul Cyrian M. Baltazar. Bukod sa pinapaalala nito ang mga lumang B-movies, may camp ang pagtatakda ng premise, at nagtagumpay ang teksto sa ipinangako. Hindi lang nito binibigkas ang pantasya ng mga inaaping trans o spektra ng LGBTQI. Pinapakita nito ang matinis na hangganan ng pagkakabigkis ng mga trans, na may hidwa pa rin ng uri at pulitika.

Tatak na ng awtor ng “Gulay at Pabahay” na si Allan Derain na timbuwangan ang limitasyon ng realismo at itanghal ang sensibilidad na pilosopikal pero hindi nakakaantok, nagpapatawa pero nagpapaisip. Tulad ng pagdampot sa karaniwang awiting bayan na “Bahay Kubo” at paghabi ng alamat mula sa guwang at katahimikang bunsod ng liriko. Nakatutuwang napagsama ang tono ng sanaysay sa simula, ngunit madulas niyang naipapasok sa mundo ng fiksiyon, sa tulong ng “bintana” na mayroon ang bahay kubo.

Namukod sa mga nakapagpasa ng tula sa taong ito ang “Clear Pagkatapos ng Giyera” ni Errol Merquita. Namumukod ang kuleksiyon dahil nagawa nitong hagipin ang sitwasyong kinapapalooban ng mga lugar sa Pilipinas, partikular ang Marawi pagkatapos ng tatlong taon. Mula sa distansiya ng panahon, ipinamumukha ng makata na kahit kumupas na ang kulay ng bandilang itim, o ang mga letra ng “Clear,” klarong hindi pa iyon nakababangon. Iniwasan ng makata ang default position na karaniwang ginagawa ng mga pumapaksa sa giyera o ang mga collateral damage/themes nito. Madaling manduro at sumakay sa high horse. Binibigyang hugis/

pagpapakahulugan ang semiotika ng mga nawasak na bahay/buhay, ang “hangganan sa pagitan ng salita at salaula.” Makinis kung mag-autopsiya ang makatang ito, matalim ang mga talinghagang binibitawan sa mga pagmamapa, inalam niya ang bokabularyo ng poetic terrain na pinapasok, sapat para sabihin, halimbawa, na political ang niqab bilang saplot, at political rin ang pagbabansag sa mga nagsusuot nito. Mataas ang insight ng kanyang mga tula dahil tulad ng linalarawan niyang galaw ng katawang balot ng niqab, may palag ang katawang iyon na ikahon. Masasabing piniga ng makata ang kakanggata ng kanyang binubuong talinghaga.

Naibigan naming lahat ang “Pamimisikleta at Ibang Tula” ni Emmanuel Quintos Velasco. Namumukod ang kuleksiyon dahil “hindi ito pa-High Chair, hindi trying hard sa relevance at hindi rin naman labis na pribado at kinulang sa sociality.” May accessibility at vulnerabilidad ang tula ng pag-ibig na hindi pa panis sa panlasa ng marami. Nakatulong ang pagmudmod nito ng mga maliliit na moments: kung paano’ng umibig ang isang, sabihin natin, naglalakad sa Luneta nang walang pera. Inupdate rin ng “Pamimisikleta” ang mga sandaling magkasama ang dalawang nilalang na maaring asimetrikal ang edad, ang danas, pero lagi, nagwawagi ang katapangan na tumaya sa pag-aapuhap ng mailap na kaligayahan.

Taglay ng “Mula sa Tawong Lapod” ni Fernando Chavez ang “pakikinig” sa madalas na isinasailalim na kamalayang tubo sa karunungan-bayan o folklore. May tindig balahibong epekto ang paglapat ng mga mata sa karaniwang bagay o bahagi ng katawan o ordinaryong gawa, o nilalang na mukhang ordinaryo pero hindi pala. May pagpupugay rin ang kuleksiyon sa alteridad ng etnisidad. Pambihira ang pihit ng defamiliarization, at nakumbinse ako sa hindi nawawalang buto ng mga nilalang ng lawod.

Marapat ilathala ang “Kartograpiya ng Pagguho” ni Ralph Fonte. Hindi prosaic kahit na malapot ang potensiyal na “ikuwento na lamang.” Sumandig sa orihinal na intensiyon na kartograpiya—napatupad ang pagmamapa ng iba’t ibang uri ng pagguho. Bihira ang tinig na napagsasabay ang lalim ng introspeksiyon at sinsin ng poetikong wika.

Umaangat sa “Lahat ng Nag-aangas ay Inaagnas” ni Paulo Miguel Tiausas dahil may laro, indak, at padyak ng mga salita. Higit itong mas maganda kaysa sa “Ilang Tala ng Taal” o “Sa Musika at iba pang Tula,” kahit na taglay rin ng huling dalawa ang nabanggit. Sa kaso ng “Ilang Tala ng Taal,” napapanahon ang pagtula sa karanasan ng Taal na sinalanta ng pagsabog ng bulkan. Kita sa kuleksiyon ang sikap na itawid ang talinghaga ng pagsasaabo at pagbabanyuhay. Pero naging predictable. Samantala, ang kuleksiyon ng “Sa Musika” ay naging tapat rin sa pangako ng paksa, ngunit nababanaag ang pihit ng pagkakamukha’t naging monotono ang boses.

Mahusay ang “Gunita sa Kalipung-awan” ni Nap Arcilla III dahil nagagawa nitong magkuwento ng suka ng loob at kamalayan pero hindi marumi, burara, o tumitikwas ang paglalarawan, pagkalahad, pagsabi ng interyor na naiisip. Naging interesado ako sa sanaysay kasi hindi lang tubog sa tubig-alat ang paglalarawan ng mga mangingisda o pagiging arawang tauhan sa pangingisda. Ang etnograpiya ng lugar ay mahusay niyang naikintal, at kahit may personal na kuwento ng sama ng loob sa amang kinulang sa pagka-ama, may haplos sa dulo ang sanaysay na tila anyo na rin ng pagpapatawad sa magulang at para sa sarili, nang magdesisyon siyang ituloy ang peregrinasyon sa Kalipung-awan, dahil namimingaw siya sa mga nawalang mahal sa buhay.

Lumulutang ang “Barya” ni Mark Angeles bilang sanaysay dahil nagsalubong ang sinsin ng pagkakatalo ng iba’t ibang mga baryang napasakamay na sa palad ng ordinaryong mamamayang Pilipino. Napaaangat ng awtor ang diskurso dahil inuugat niya ang personal na pagkakilala sa barya bilang paslit na naglipat-bahay, bantay ng tindahan, estudyanteng namulat sa halaga ng kabilang mukha ng bagol at kabilang mukha ng mga bayaning tila balintunang ginugunita sa barya, ngunit ironikong ang halaga’y inversion ng kanilang pagiging marangal at rebolusyonaryo. Nagawa pang maging humorous ng akda sa paglapat ng kanyang commentary sa balita, sa gobyerno, sa mga sakit ng balat na nakukuha sa barya. Isang tagumpay ng paglalahad ng impormasyon na lampas sa personal at umaangat sa sosyolohikal at pulitikal.

Kailangang ilathala ang kritikal na sanaysay na “Epiko’t Etnograpiya ng Kamatayan at Paglalakbay” ni Jay Jomar Quintos dahil napagsasanib sa akda ang masusing pagbasa ng mga epiko pero hindi lang umuuwi sa istruktural na sipat, o paglalata ng mga paghahambing. Nabasa ko rito ang interdisciplinary na pagsandig sa antropolohiya, at nalalapatan ng intelektwal na pag-uurir at sa mga tekstong mula sa mga pamayanang inuusig rin ng kontradiksiyon ng paglimot at paglaho.

Mahusay ang guhit sa “Mula kay Tandang Iskong Basahan” ni Erik Pingol, na halaw sa panulat ng kuwentistang si Jun Cruz Reyes. Oo, maaring sabihing bakas sa estilo ng pagguhit ang marka ng *Marvel* o *Sandman* series ni Neil Gaiman. Pero mahirap namang sabihin na kailangang puro rin ang teknik ng pagsasalarawan. Ang mahalaga’y hindi lumihis, bagkus, naihatid ang diwa ng kuwento sa bloke ng ilustrasyon at bula ng dialogue.

For the section in English, I shall be combining my own observations with those of Charlson Ong, Associate Editor for English.

The short stories are almost all in the realist mode and focused on the country's middle class.

"Penance" by Daryl Delgado revisits the fateful days of People Power, from an unusual perspective: that of an eleven-year-old girl, the daughter of a woman whose family are Marcos loyalists residing in Leyte, home to the dictator's wife. The child perceives what a catastrophe People Power is for her family, and for most of Leyte. She struggles to distinguish the truth from the lies in what she hears from her uncles and aunts about the strange events in Manila, while catching glimpses of it unfolding on TV. At the same time she is also trying to distinguish the truth from the lies in what her mother has told her about herself and her "special project," before practically abandoning her daughter with the relatives she barely knows, and taking off with her theatre friends. In self-defense, the girl creates a fiction of her own. This is a coming-of-age story, in more ways than one. At a later point in the story, the protagonist is revealed to be a 30-something woman, recalling that time in her life. But the narrative ends on a note of ambivalence. The recollections have brought no epiphany.

On the surface, "The Mendozas" by Neal Amandus Gellaco seems to be a story about an average middle-class Filipino family—father, mother, and three children (two boys and a girl). But it's actually a narrative of relentless domestic violence in different forms, the more sinister because the victims are, in their different ways, unknowingly (although in the case of the mother, perhaps knowingly) complicit. The story progresses in linear fashion, but in five sections, each one narrated by a different member of the family. As in the previous story, the ending is ambiguous. Has what happened to this son now, happened before? Is the mother now going to claim her right to practice her profession again? Or is all going to be as before?

It is, once again, a middle-class family that takes center stage in "Rehearsing Life" by Adelaimar Arias Jose. But here the son and daughter are grown up and preoccupied with their own lives, and the head of the house is lying in bed, in a coma. So center stage is a hospital room. The wife, the story's first-person protagonist, is seated by her husband's hospital bed, waiting for her children to arrive for the family meeting which the attending doctor has requested. And she reviews her life, trying to determine what meaning it has, beyond the "job of wife, home-maker, housekeeper, mother-in-law-pleaser, mother, private nurse," and now, "baby-sitter." At the day's end, which is also the story's end, her discovery is perhaps that her life has just been a rehearsal for what she is about to embark on.

The lone speculative fiction piece is “The Long Way Home” by Carmel Ilustrisimo. It is set in Neo-Manila in the 2080s, which is technologically advanced, but mired in a system which privileges “naturals” and excludes “synthetics,” thus simply replicating the Manila of the previous centuries. And Madelyn, the story’s “synthetic” protagonist, finds herself in a situation which recalls Rosa Park’s famous defiance of a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. Which should have made this a cynical story. Except that it isn’t.

The suites of poetry are a particular joy to read.

One reviewer described Kabel Misha Ligo’s “Inglisero” as “well aware of the duplicity of loving the colonial tongue.” This is clearest, of course, in the title poem. But the poet’s ironic vision encompasses both the mundane (beauty contests, the mall that is “like an alien ship/ that descended from the dirty mustard-colored heavens,” the tilapia), and the transcendent (“our inherent capacity for justice,” original sin). But there is also, the sudden, heartbreaking lyricism: “Say we have another year./ Say we have another. Say *we* and do not walk away.”

Manuel Albis’s “Illogisms” present the reader with philosophy as sophisticated wordplay. (The dictionary translates the French word *illogism* into “illogicality.”) Hence “Absence / Is a unit of distance / Measured in yearn.” And “Like a world traveler / Accosted at the checkpoint / And asked for her passport / Or a password / Time is asked for / A passage among passages.” Yet these poems are also a comment on our contemporary political reality, as in the poem “3. Non Modo Lapis Est Lapis.” One reviewer referred to the collection as “sheer delight.”

For many readers, Bernard Capinpin’s “Into the Planetarium” may require some disambiguation, beginning with the title of the first poem “On the Question of *Atlas Eclipticalis*,” which might refer to the 1959 Atlas of stars, which has that phrase for its title; or to the early 1960s composition of John Cage of the same title (itself not quite accessible to the uninitiated). At first glance these prose poems seem all images, all atmosphere, until one realizes that their theme is a compelling one.

Joel Toledo’s “Planet Nine” displays the familiar signs of the poet’s sure hand—the mastery of craft and lyric sentiment, the luminous images drawn from nature. But this suite also includes, the startling juxtaposition of the persona’s father standing, hand on hip, like “some Spanish conquistador,” with Google and tweets, in the poem “Sea Level,” which turns out to be eco-poetry. And in the poem “Translator,” we are suddenly thrust into the reality of a citizenry rendered helpless by a leadership both inept and dangerous. “The headlines insist on staying put / on managing the disarray on our own. / Meanwhile, we dial into static. / Into dirges in the dark (but dirges, too) / in daytime.”

It would seem that Krysta Lee Frost's "Antibody" is an allusion to the pandemic that has laid siege to the world. But these poems are about a more personal struggle. It is the persona's body (and perhaps her mind, as well) that is under attack. There are images of wounds, scabs, scars, all kinds of illnesses. There are clues to the source of all this pain and hurt and self-loathing—perhaps racism (the persona is of mixed race, a "half-breed"), perhaps abuse ("My mouth is missing eight teeth, but the gaps are gone"), perhaps abandonment? The persona's defense is to put on disguises, to wear costumes, to turn herself into a marionette, into a contortionist, but some of the disguises seem to take the form of other illnesses ("the famished shapes my body makes to circumvent shame"—anorexia? Bulimia? This poetry is powerful, and disturbing. The last poem: "I clean it up—to nurse / the wound all night—to hurt something / to heal—to call it progress." Is that a hint of a cure? Or a promise of more of the same?

It is the creative nonfiction pieces which are most clearly creatures of the pandemic.

Priscilla Macansantos, poet and academic, harnesses the power of both collective memory and personal memory to heal the psychic wounds of disease. The first part of "To Heal" is a memoir about the author's family—parents, siblings, aunts—and the illnesses they succumbed to or survived, in a time when access to modern hospitals was rare. Things have changed for the narrator, her husband, and their child, who was born in the city, and is spared the effects of the infirmity she was born with, because of the specialist consulted by her parents. But her husband is not as fortunate. The second part is an essay about the pandemic, and how the author, and everyone she knows, cope with it, this time, in isolation, deprived of the community, which in an earlier time, provided comfort, eased loneliness and sorrow. And yet it ends on a note of hope, and the hope is, yet again, a different kind of memory.

"An Account of April 2020" by Ana Margarita R. Nuñez is a whimsical piece about two families surviving under lockdown. One is the family consisting of the narrator and her two little boys. The other is a family consisting of a mother cat and three kittens. The key to that survival is the resiliency of motherhood, amid unexpected intrusions, among humans, as well as cats.

Jen Eusebio's "contagion: quartet" is a description of the pandemic that is almost a prose poem. It is full of images—visual, olfactory, tactile... The contagion is like a person. It is "lonely, needs people. Fails to thrive in solitude." The last movement of her quartet is composed of fragments, definitions of relief, the last one being gentle instructions on how to escape from quicksand. A most unusual and exquisite piece.

And then we have two critical essays.

In “Passing and the Invisible Lesbian Writer,” Jhoanna Lynn B. Cruz, whose *Woman on Fire* is the first collection of lesbian stories in the country, notes the absence of a word for “lesbian” in Filipino. She points out the negative connotations of terms like “tibo” and “lesbian”; notes the absence of SOGI discrimination and gender identity in labor policy discussions. Then she offers an explanation for her own decision to pass as a heterosexual woman and writer in the ways she presents herself physically. And, finally, she traces her eventual acceptance that “my feminine gender expression contributes to the invisibility of lesbians, particularly lesbian writers in the Philippines,” and her decision to “come out as a lesbian author.”

J. Neil Garcia’s “Translation and Philippine Poetry in English” posits that English in our literature is an ironic language in two ways: (a) ironic because, “historically it shouldn’t even have been an option to begin with;” and (b) “ironic because the everyday reality of most Filipinos isn’t monolingual (or monocultural) at all. Thus the challenge of making English carry the weight of our people’s intensely transcultural and syncretic situation remains altogether daunting.” Our literature in English, says Garcia, “is a translational literature it negotiates the plurality of cultural and linguistic registers and ideas of the Philippine reality, and encodes the in/as English.” He believes that his task as a teacher of Philippine literature in English is “to postcolonially interpret its seemingly universal themes, images, and textual gestures, by translating back into the specific conditions and situations that framed and engendered them.” And he proceeds to demonstrate this “translational” approach by doing short critical readings of a few canonical poems: “I Have Begrudded the Years” and “Old Maid Walking of a Street” by Angela Manalang Gloria; “Prayer” by Francisco Arcellana; “Bonsai” by Edith Tiempo; and “Six P.M.” by Nick Joaquin. Altogether an original, and brilliant work.

Our issue closes with “Merlie M. Alunan: The Filipino Writer as Bisaya” by Michael Carlo Villas. This article is part of the UP Institute of Creative Writing’s Akdang Buhay Series. Akdang Buhay is a digital library collection of interviews of senior writers, about their lifework, conducted by younger writers. Villas’s article traces Alunan’s career as a writer, which began in 1983, when she was given a teaching job by UP Visayas-Tacloban College. Her marriage had broken up. She had left her children with her parents in Ormoc, and lived by herself in the UPTC Guesthouse. This is where she began to write poetry. Villas lists Alunan’s awards, her foreign residencies, her books, and her main advocacy. For, aside from being widely praised for her exquisite poetry in English, she is known for her spirited and determined advocacy for the use of the native language for literary purposes. “She did for Waray literature what Leoncio Deriada did for Western Visayas literature, and Resil Mojares

and Erlinda Alburo for Cebuano literature.” Alunan is also, of course, a distinguished scholar, a beloved teacher, and an indefatigable organizer of writing workshops for writers from all over the Visayas.

With such a harvest, the pandemic notwithstanding, we believe that there is reason to celebrate literature, and the obstinacy of those who produce it, in whatever language. No calamity, natural or manmade, has succeeded in silencing them. Long may the tribe prosper! Mabuhay tayong lahat!

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